

Knee-deep in paperwork

THERE was a decided sense of déjà vu at this week's public inquiry into George Suter's plan to transform his two farms into a golf course along the Hughenden Valley.

We guessed that the Whitehall Inspector, Anthony Bingham, felt the same.

He asked for those seriously involved to hold up their hands.

Pretty well every organisation did so, Bucks County Council, National Trust, Council for the Preservation of Rural England, Wycombe District Council, Hughenden this, Naphill that, local residents even.

Mr Bingham winced when further correspondence was offered from such as Wycombe's MP, Ray Whitney. And then there was Jack

By Bob Perrin

Scruton, Richard Pushman, Wing Commander Derek Martin et al. Indeed, much of the letters page of the Free Press made flesh.

Wycombe's planning chairman, Freddie Secker, a lover of "nerve sticks", cigarettes, was among those hovering around the strange chamber where if you don't sit tall you tend to become a remote head and shoulders beneath the light-coloured wood beyond the green-baized walls.

Bunkers

More letters were advanced. "I'm knee-high with letters of submission," despaired Mr Bingham by the back wall of bricks, realising his problem of separating opinion from opinion.

Simply, in the applicant's case,

Suter's golf course would be the greatest blessing to Hughenden Valley since Benjamin Disraeli moved there 140 years ago.

To opponents, the opposite. The course would be the most disastrous happening to the beleaguered valley community. Something akin to a nuclear bomb dropping on RAF Strike Command, Naphill, which will surely happen if the worst comes to the worst, and from where, ironically, Suter expects to recruit many of his members. From one bunker to another, as it were.

Then, as all this was being explained in the most polite, m'learned terms from barristers on a good earner, who should slip into the chamber but James Richard Holt, MP for Langborough, not many years back leader of the Tory Group running Wycombe District

Council, nicknamed Mr Big or The Ayatollah in his ruling days.

He sat next to George Suter, charcoal-grey suit contrasting with Farmer George's powder-blue offering.

Some of the golf course's opponents seemed to turn a whiter shade of pale. They shouldn't have done. George Suter and Jim Holt have been friends from way back when.

Odds

But the presence of a Member of Parliament might well have tightened minds and arguments. This was no ordinary public inquiry. A lot of important eyes are on its outcome.

Suter, whose indebtedness in his farming business and on this project is thought to run into hundreds of thousands of pounds, is confident of attaining his dream, the Disraeli

Golf Club, Hughenden. The alternative for him is, perhaps, unthinkable.

"I think we're odds on to win," he predicted to me before the inquiry began.

"It's evens," counselled his MP friend later, puffing a cigar at the Crest Hotel, nursing a glass of mineral water. Holt, the former Micklefield bookmaker, added sagely: "It has to be evens when one man is making the decision."

"Okay, they might look at the inspector's decision whatever it is in Whitehall, might ask for his reasons, but they won't overturn it. No way."

Thus, the present Government's ruling about the use of redundant agricultural land has been as much at question at Wycombe Council Chamber this week as has been George Suter's financial future and the future lifestyles of those who live close by his land.

Golf course inquiry opens

By David Feldstein

A GOVERNMENT inspector has been sitting in High Wycombe this week to consider an application by Hughenden farmer George Suter to turn his land into a golf course.

The inquiry, which began on Tuesday morning at Wycombe Council's Queen Victoria Street offices, will carry on into next week.

It followed Wycombe District Council's decision to refer the application to the Environment Secretary last spring.

It had approved the plans, but handed them over as a major departure from the county's structure plan policies.

On Tuesday, barrister for Mr Suter, Rhodri Price Lewis outlined the case for his client's proposals on the 225 acre site.

Sports Council figures have shown that there is a need for another golf course in this area even though Wycombe council is presently building its own at Town Farm towards Penn.

He added that the four public footpaths which run over Mr Suter's land would not have to be diverted and it would be safe for walkers to use them.

Although the proposed course is in the green belt and in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Mr Price Lewis told the inquiry that it is the view of many experts that such proposals, designed well, would enhance the area.

It is also envisaged that the scheme would create some 20 new jobs in the area.



Farmer George Suter at the site of his controversial golf club project.

FOR...

Experts speak

Quota

Mr Suter, Rhodri Price Lewis outlined the case for his client's proposals on the 225 acre site.

Quota

The plans are for a change of use of land at Church Farm and Naphill Farm to an 18-hole course and the transformation of farm buildings into a club house and short stay hotel.

Mr Price Lewis told the inspector, Anthony Bingham, that Church Farm could no longer pay its way as a working farm, firstly because of the poor land and secondly because of the low milk quota which Mr Suter, as a dairy farmer, has to abide by.

"Mr Suter has done everything he can to make the farm go, as a going concern, but there is an ever increasing level of indebtedness," he said.

He also explained that such a scheme for a golf course would be reversible back to farm land.

He emphasised that

Reasons

for golf course

FORMER Wycombe District councillor George Suter has offered SIX main reasons why his 18-hole golf course scheme at Hughenden should be given the go ahead.

They are:

- The land is too poor to be used for a successful farm
- There is demand for another golf course in the area
- His proposals will enhance the Green Belt and area of outstanding natural beauty rather than ruin it
- Wildlife will be able to thrive in the course's rough, more than on a farm
- There will be no traffic problems caused by the new club
- Around 20 jobs will be created.

FOR...

CHAIRMAN of Wycombe District Council, Len Hampton expressed his support for George Suter's Hughenden golf club scheme.

He told Department of Environment inspector Anthony Bingham: "I and the majority of my colleagues feel that a golf course is consistent with the Green Belt and the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

"Indeed it will guarantee retention of an open landscape.

"Modern farming could make more drastic changes to the character of the area."

Mr Hampton cited the present course at Hazlemere as an example of how successfully a golf club can be developed in the Chiltern green belt and AONB.

He swept aside objections that there are plenty of clubs already in the area.

"I checked with about ten local courses," he said. "And



Len Hampton: For.

all but one had waiting lists for membership."

He added: "Local people are also concerned about the footpaths but I know of several courses with footpaths where, according to the secretaries, there have been no claims for injuries even though the paths are well used."

Experts speak in favour

THROUGHOUT this week's inquiry a number of expert witnesses have been called to speak in support of farmer George Suter's controversial golf club project.

Among them were landscape architect Richard Stone who said the scheme would result in little change to the Hughenden Valley.

He told the inquiry on Wednesday: "The development would bring about positive enhancement both to the landscape as well as to nature conservation and to recreational interests.

"It would also ensure the restoration and survival of an important group of farm buildings from a scenic point of view — some of which might otherwise fall into irreversible decay."

He explained that further farming of the land could lead to the loss of trees and

hedgerows whereas the golf course would keep most of them and add more.

"If planning permission were granted it would bring the site under planning control, which it is not under its present farm use," he said.

Dogged

Another person called by Mr Suter's barrister was surveyor Steven Sensecall.

He emphasised Mr Suter's difficulty in making Church Farm and Naphill Farm pay their way either as dairy or arable enterprises.

Dogged by disaster over the years, Mr Suter has had to slaughter diseased cattle and abide by a very restrictive EEC milk quota.

Mr Sensecall explained that Mr Suter looked at alternative farming in 1984 but found it to be uneconomic

because his farm lacked the necessary grain handling, drying and storage facilities.

"Faced with these undeniable and accumulating problems Mr Suter was left with no option but to seek an alternative use for his land and buildings," said Mr Sensecall.

"The idea of a golf course was conceived on the basis that there was clearly a demand for further golf provision in the High Wycombe area. Initial studies suggested that Church Farm and Naphill Farm was an ideal location."

He said that if permission was not granted Mr Suter would have to take part in the Government's "set aside" policy whereby land is left fallow in return for a compensatory payment.

"In my view this would be a terrible waste of an opportunity to provide for much

AGAINST...

Hughenden Parish Council, Richard Pushman says the majority of residents around the proposed site for George Suter's golf club oppose the plan.

Naphill, Widmer End and Hughenden residents associations are all set against the scheme, he told inquiry inspector Anthony Bingham on Wednesday.

He said: "My council is very concerned that the public interest and disquiet has not been sufficiently considered by the planning committee."

He explained that Mr Suter's application was approved by the full district council in the "dying hours of

its existence" and that it should have been dealt with by the new council in May 1987.

"Hughenden Parish Council owns the land immediately to the north of the site in question," he said.

"This land was purchased ostensibly to protect the valley from further development southwards towards Wycombe.

"We are very anxious that approval to the change of use of the adjacent meadows will suburbanise that land and reduce our chances of retaining a rural buffer between the housing development and the existing open farmland."

Mr Pushman also express-

ed concern that the land not used in the scheme would become agriculturally sterile, leading to pressures for development.

On the subject of the footpaths which will run over the golf course, he said: "Walking is a pastime enjoyed by many local residents of both Hughenden and Naphill and of course the numerous visitors to the national trust property of Hughenden Manor.

"It seems most unfair to rob them of this enjoyment by the undoubted intimidation of a small white and very hard projectile, rarely under very great control of those non-professionals most likely to use a pay and play course."



Richard Pushman: Against

unity to provide for much greater public access to this land and would inevitably lead to a deterioration in the character of the landscape," he said.

Inquiry continues..

THIS week's planning inquiry was scheduled for three days but the detail of Mr Suter's golf club scheme has been so great and the number of interested parties so many that it will go into next week.

It is expected that the Bucks County Council and the National Trust will speak against the scheme mainly on the grounds that a golf course would be detrimental to the Chiltern Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.